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Art and Science of Teaching / Ask Yourself: Are Students Engaged?

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The term *classroom engagement* suggests a range of concepts. Some researchers talk about emotional engagement, some talk about cognitive engagement, and some talk about situational engagement.¹

In considering how they might foster student engagement, teachers should ask themselves four questions, which encompass these various types of engagement. Teachers can use the questions—along with the powerful strategies they suggest—as a planning framework that has student engagement at its core.

Question 1: Do I provide a safe, caring, and energetic environment?

Regardless of whatever else teachers do, if they don't establish a safe and caring environment, student engagement will be minimal. Safety begins with well-developed rules and procedures that all students understand. Teachers need to continually revisit and update these rules and procedures to meet students' changing needs and the classroom's changing environment. For example, a teacher might change the procedure that calls for students to raise their hands before asking a question on the basis of student feedback that it's too restrictive and doesn't encourage interaction.

Teachers communicate caring through daily actions that show students the teacher likes them and is there to help them learn. For example, a teacher might pat students on the back when appropriate and make comments like "nice job" and "thank you for doing that."

Teachers can establish an energetic environment by maintaining a high energy level themselves as well as by incorporating physical movement into daily classroom activities. They might ask students to move to various parts of the room to signal their position on an issue or their answer to a question.

Question 2: Do I make things interesting?

Psychologists refer to two types of interest: *triggered* interest and *maintained* interest. Triggered interest occurs when a teacher does something out of the ordinary, such as singing in class or hopping on one foot to demonstrate a scientific principle. Although such activities might be fun to do occasionally, they don't sustain students' interest for long.

A preferable goal is to cultivate maintained interest. Activities designed to do this play on the natural curiosity of the

human mind. In general, we humans are interested in anything incongruous to what we expect. Providing unusual information about a topic capitalizes on this tendency.

For example, the fact that the sun is much cooler at its core than on its surface is incongruous with our expectations and might stimulate students' desire to learn more. Activities that require students to produce missing information in an atmosphere of mild competition also stimulate maintained interest. Gamelike activities are perfect strategies to this end.

For example, a teacher might include important academic content in games similar to *Jeopardy* or *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*? Moreover, students are likely to stay interested if the game is structured so that students aren't sure when and if they'll be called on. If students believe that the teacher might ask any of them to participate at any moment, they will more likely attend to the activities at hand. A teacher might call on students randomly or use techniques, such as response boards, that require every student to respond.

Finally, interest is maintained when we disagree with someone. Consequently, teachers might set up formal or informal debates regarding controversial topics, such as global warming.

Question 3: Do I demonstrate why the content is important?

Even if teachers make classroom activities interesting, students won't be deeply engaged unless they think the content is important to their lives. This, of course, can be a significant challenge because students might not immediately see how right triangles or reading a specific novel can be of use to them.

Of course, the most straightforward way to address the importance of content is to demonstrate to students how they can use it in the future. For example, a math teacher might ask students to identify ways people use polynomials in real life. A student who's a fan of football might discover that quarterback ratings in professional football are computed using complex polynomials.

Teachers can also indirectly communicate the importance of content through their enthusiasm. If the teacher is genuinely excited about content, the tacit message to students is that it contains useful information. Teachers can also share their excitement by recounting how they became interested in the content when they were students themselves.

Question 4: Do I help students realize that personal effort is the key to success?

Feeling safe and cared for, experiencing high energy in the classroom, being interested in the activities, realizing that the content is important—although these components are essential, they can't sustain student engagement if students believe they can't accomplish the work. The best safeguard against this possibility is to cultivate what Dweck refers to as the *growth mind-set*—the belief that individual effort is the key to success.²

Teachers can build this mind-set in students by teaching them about the elasticity of the human brain and how hard work and focus can actually change the brain's physical aspects. In addition, they can continually remind students of the importance of effort, particularly when students engage in challenging tasks. Teachers might also ask students to track their levels of effort for a short time so they see the relationship between how hard they try and how well they do in class. Finally, teachers might provide students examples of people who've accomplished great things through their effort. Bringing in guest speakers from the community who've grown up in circumstances similar to those that students face is a powerful technique to this end.

It's Not Serendipitous

Student engagement is strongly influenced by what teachers do in class. With preparation and planning, every teacher can use these techniques to heighten student engagement.

Endnotes

¹ Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J., & Heflebower, T. (2011). *The highly engaged classroom*. Bloomington, IN: Marzano Research Laboratory.

² Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.

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